

Position

## Me as a Building

Andreas Angelidakis

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I often talk to my analyst about work. Sometimes I'll be complaining about a collaboration that is not working out, other times I'll be excited about an idea for a space I came up with, or a challenging proposal that came my way. He says that psychoanalysis is the interior architecture of the soul, and that sounds kind of right: you rearrange things, you understand how to treat a space, you place feelings and thoughts in a way that makes sense and gives you comfort.

In one particular session, I spoke about a student project that I was considering revising for *documenta* 14, a thesis of sorts at Columbia University with Keller Easterling. The subject of the thesis was 'Unauthorized Architecture', and it was an effort to understand my attraction to the weird unfinished or overfinished concrete frame buildings that make up my hometown of Athens. Back then, I had talked about a new paradigm for architecture, one that turned the typically linear sequence of 'design, construct, inhabit' on its head. These buildings were constructed, then sometimes inhabited, and later on designed. Then they were designed some more, constructed some more and further inhabited. A loopy process that never seemed to end, as these buildings adapted to circumstance and struggled to stay legal. Usually a young family would build one of these frames without a proper building permit, taking advantage of legal loopholes. They would perhaps complete one storey of the frame as an apartment, or perhaps the ground floor as a shop. As the years pass and the family grows, they might finish a second apartment for one of their kids, then another and so forth. So, it became typical for an entire family, and their children's families to all live in the same building. These forever-developing, unauthorised concrete buildings became portraits of the typical Greek family, and subsequently portraits of a nuclear family society.

But I wondered to my analyst if this reading was enough to justify my fascination with these unauthorised buildings; enough to justify a life-long fascination. He replied: 'Well, you were unauthorised as a kid too, just like these buildings'. He was referring to the countless sessions in which I had talked about my first memory as a child: I am combing a doll's hair, hidden away on the kitchen balcony, where no-one would see me. Playing with dolls and trying on my mother's dresses and makeup was something my mother allowed, though it was not to be known publicly. Boys should be playing football and army, not hair and makeup.

His comment startled me. Had I been seeing myself in these illegal buildings? Had I been looking for some kind of reflection of myself, in structures that I thought were inexplicable and fascinating? Did I see some kind of queerness in these unauthorised structures, a queerness that I knew as familiar, but grew up considering unauthorised behavior?

When speaking about my work in these psychoanalytic sessions, I had often stumbled upon realisations. Sometimes I realised that, in a particular project, I was trying to reenact or even reverse a recent reality of my life. The Troll project was an interesting example of this: I spoke to him about a modernist building that, I imagined, felt disillusioned with the city, gathered its powers, stood up, and headed for the mountains where it would find peace and quiet. In the video project that followed, I gendered the building as 'she'. The analyst saw it as me resurrecting a building, making it alive, making it walk again. I treated it as an architectural fantasy, a vision I had while driving through the city. He suggested that I was trying to resurrect my mother who had recently passed away. But the part of the video that emotionally resonated more with me was not the 'coming to life' part. It was the 'going away to the mountain' part where, lying down and covering herself with earth, the building becomes a mountain. Or perhaps she went away to die? Because in architecture, mountains usually signify death of some sort. Was the building me or my mother?

Work in this context was a way to deal with life, in ways that I didn't really know how to, but looking for myself in these buildings was a step in a new direction.



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My behaviour as a kid was textbook queer, even my own mother admitted as much when I finally came out to her in my early twenties. She was shocked that she hadn't figured out my queerness by herself, even though the clues were there: playing with dolls? Check. Trying her makeup? Check. Hanging out only with girls? Check. Effeminate? Check. The list could go on.

Now, I began thinking of these buildings as potentially queer, but what was it that could make a building queer? Was it enough to be unauthorised? Or perhaps understanding buildings as portraits is queer enough as an architectural process, so that the building in question does not need actually be gay? Or was I recognising that these buildings had to essentially build themselves, much like a gay boy growing up in a heterosexual family? Kids model themselves on their parents, but what happens when you're gay and your parents are straight?

Athens is a city that was forced to build itself several times. First in 1922 when 1.5 million refugees arrived from the coast of Turkey, in what used to be a town of hardly 200,000 inhabitants. The Asia Minor Greeks were placed in camps outside the city limits, and governments struggled to provide housing. The refugee camps gradually became suburbs, either with social housing provided by the state, or more commonly from the refugees' own initiatives to provide a home for their families. Soon after, the first legislation appeared, declaring all structures built outside the city limits as unauthorised.

A similar scenario recurred in the 1950s, when the Marshall Plan focused its funding on the city of Athens, essentially leaving the countryside a post-war financial ruin, while the city's infrastructure was updated extensively. Recent studies describe this as simple cold war geopolitics: NATO wanted the population gathered in one place, because a large part was communist, and they did not want Greece going over to the Soviet Block. The plan worked, and over the course of a decade half the population of Greece moved to Athens. Again, the government could not provide all the housing, and the city once again had to build itself up. Without any parents to model herself on, or urban planners to teach her how to walk, Athens became somehow queer. Neither Western nor Eastern, neither modern nor traditional. Never European and not Middle Eastern enough, Athens and her buildings had to figure out how to become themselves, how to shape their own identity.





In the installation for *documenta* 14, I made a fictional company that would investigate the parameters of the making of Athens. The company would look at facts and issues, and come up with a report to be presented at the Kassel leg of *documenta*. While working in the space and tweaking the material I had collected and produced, it became evident that as much as I was talking about Athens, I was also talking about the 'making' of myself. Mixed in with historic images of the city and its building typologies, I put a picture, found in a family album, of myself at four years old in front of a mirror, trying to comb my unruly hair. I almost put another picture of myself in there, as a depressed teenager, right before I rebelled and didn't become a civil engineer as my parents wished. Architecture was a compromise, not too far from myself, but not really me either. Was being an architect a kind of excuse for being gay? Would I have been happier if I were a hairdresser, forever playing with my mom's dresses? Somehow – at least in my eyes – takes on these questions, without really providing answers, either to me or to the city it is meant to be studying.

When I talk about cities or buildings, I have to stop myself and check to see if I'm not really just talking about myself. At other times I wonder what the ingredient is that makes me queer? What are the elements of my queerness, and how do I go beyond the superficial cliché of the queer? I haven't been in a gay bar in perhaps a decade, I don't hang around with the boys much, I don't identify much with 'gay culture'. On the other hand, I am a shaved-head-and-bearded man with an affinity for fashion, I take my antiretrovirals religiously, and I watch RuPaul's Drag Race. A walking cliché who doesn't want to be categorised? Is that queerness? Conformity masquerading as something 'other'?

If I were to attempt to define queer space or queer buildings, I would probably fail, and not because my gaydar is off, but because every time I would have to come up with the elements that make up the queerness of the psyche of the particular building. Or the particular city. I wouldn't even know how to elaborate on Athens being a queer city, because maybe she's not even queer but identifies as trans and hasn't told us yet. And how would her heterosexual population feel about that? Would they be alienated, suddenly in the belly of a monster they no longer recognise, like the monster in *Alien* growing inside somebody, just the other way around? Or would each inhabitant recognise themselves in their city, see themselves in their home, understand their psyche while the furniture in their living room? Which just makes me shudder, because it makes me wonder about the psyche of the homeless person.





**Biography**

Andreas Angelidakis studied architecture at Sci-ARC in Los Angeles, and Columbia University in New York. He describes himself as 'an architect who doesn't build'. Instead he has developed an artistic voice with the exhibition format acting as vehicle for ideas and medium for his artistic practice. As architect, participant and curator, he has contributed to various exhibitions in Kassel, Athens, Thessaloniki, Liverpool, Vilnius and New York. Recently, he curated the exhibition 'OOO Object Oriented Ontology' at Kunsthalle Basel (2017).